

History of the parks and public grounds of Minneapolis /

HISTORY OF THE PARKS AND PUBLIC GROUNDS OF MINNEAPOLIS.*

* Read at the monthly meeting of the Executive Council, November 11, 1912.

BY CHARLES M. LORING.

Members of the Minnesota Historical Society:

At the request of your Secretary, I present to you a history of the parks of Minneapolis, which I hope may have some influence in promoting the development of parks and playgrounds in other cities of the state. Even the small village should have its public park, centrally located, and land should be secured before it is occupied and covered with buildings. The villages as well as the cities are growing, and the necessity for a public meeting-place for recreation is more and more apparent as the years go by.

The village of Bluff City, Kansas, where there are but sixty-five voters, has become noted for its beautiful park of twelve acres and for its neat and well kept houses and lawns. Several publications have given views of the park and noted its influence upon the citizens of the village, who organized a band which discourses music in the park, and in it, each year, there is held a social gathering. Why not make every village in our beautiful State of Minnesota as attractive as is this one in Kansas?

It has been demonstrated in Minneapolis and St. Paul that no investment of public funds has brought greater returns financially than those invested in the parks and playgrounds, and none has brought more pleasure and added more to the health of the citizens.

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The history of the Minneapolis parks demonstrates the necessity of securing park sites before the land is occupied. Captain Edward Murphy in 1857 donated the first park to the City of Minneapolis, but this remained a vacant tract, used only as a cow pasture or public common until 1880, when the 600 City Council passed an ordinance creating the office of City Forester, who, under the supervision of the writer, laid out walks and planted this park with trees. Since that time it has been of inestimable value to a now densely populated section of the city.

Friends of the parks had a long struggle and met with many disappointments, before success crowned their efforts; and the delay in securing land cost the city large sums of money and the loss of many valuable sites, which were offered at figures that now seem very insignificant.

At the first public meeting, called in September, 1864, to advocate the purchase of a tract of land for a park, containing twenty acres, which was offered for \$6,000, the discussion of the question was very warm, and one prominent citizen declared that there would never be a house south of Tenth street, and that beyond Seventh street it was all park. But the park advocates were in a majority, and the Town Supervisors were instructed to make the purchase. However, the obstructors controlled them, politically, the matter went by default, and we lost a park where it is now needed. This property is now valued at over half a million dollars.

In March, 1866, the citizens of St. Anthony and Minneapolis held an election to decide the question of uniting the two cities, and to authorize the purchase of Nicollet Island, containing about forty acres, for a public park, which was offered by the owners for the sum of \$47,500. The project was defeated by eighty-five votes, and its defeat has been regretted by the citizens of Minneapolis to the present day, and is referred to as "our great mistake." The island was covered with a fine growth of forest trees, mostly hard maple, and is admirably located for a public park. This land is now valued at more than a million dollars. September 15, 1865, a committee, which had been appointed at a special

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town meeting to recommend a site for a park, reported that a tract of forty acres could be purchased for the sum of \$8,500, payable in three and five years, with interest at seven per cent, but this was not purchased.

Through the efforts of the advocates of public parks, the City Council passed a resolution favoring the establishment of parks; and on the 8th day of July, 1869, a proposition was made by the owner to sell a tract of land containing forty acres 601 for the sum of \$25,000, payable in the bonds of the city, running twenty-five years at eight per cent. This property is now covered with fine houses, among them that of the late Hon. William D. Washburn. A part, containing ten acres, has just been purchased by the city for a park, for the sum of \$250,000, making the value of the tract of forty acres for the proposed park to be now \$1,000,000.

In 1872 Col. William S. King offered 250 acres of land around Lake Harriet for \$50,000. He was told by a member of the City Council that he had better go back to Washington and not try to unload his farm on the city for so large a sum. The property is now worth more than \$2,000,000. Two lots in this tract were sold recently for \$15,000.

In April, 1882, a block of land in Harmon's Addition was purchased at a cost of \$13,475, the city paying one half and the citizens of the neighborhood contributing one half of this amount. This is the first park for which the public paid any portion of its cost. It is now surrounded with beautiful homes, and is the great attraction of the neighborhood.

In October, 1882, Mrs. Mary C. Morris, Katherine B. Steele, and Mrs. Caroline H. Addison, daughters of the late Franklin Steele, purchased a block of land at a cost of \$20,000, which they presented to the city on condition that it be improved as a park, to be called Franklin Steele Square.

On January 29, 1883, the Board of Trade passed a series of resolutions in favor of securing legislation authorizing the creation of a Board of Park Commissioners, with authority to purchase or condemn land for a system of public parks and boulevards. A

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committee was appointed to draft a bill, which was reported at a meeting on February 6; and the Committee on Public Parks was requested to confer at once with a committee of the City Council and the Chamber of Commerce, and to request the aid of these bodies in carrying out this important matter.

Opinions were expressed that speedy action should be taken, and that from \$100,000 to \$200,000 should be appropriated for park purposes; but the City Council passed strong resolutions condemning the park scheme. A bill was prepared by the Board of Trade and was presented to the Legislature by the Hennepin County delegation, who amended it by a provision 602 to submit the same to a vote of the people. It then passed both houses under a suspension of the rules.

On March 30 the Knights of Labor adopted a set of resolutions condemning the movement in favor of parks and calling for a public mass meeting to protest against the ratification of the Park Act. The hall was crowded, but no one was allowed to express an opinion favorable to the passage of the act.

The election to ratify the Park Act was held on April 3, 1883, and, notwithstanding the strenuous efforts of the opposition, it was carried by a majority of 1,405. The friends of the parks, after twenty years of earnest effort, achieved success, and the Board was organized and proceeded to lay out and acquire a system of parks and parkways which is now the pride of the city.

Within two years of the organization of the Board, those who were the most strenuous opponents of the measure began to appreciate the value of parks; the Knights of Labor, who had so bitterly opposed the adoption of the Park Act, sent a petition to the Board favoring the acquisition of land for a park; and the large number of children with their parents who visited the parks was evidence that they were for the working people, as well as for the rich.

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Soon after the organization of the Board, Dr. Jacob S. Elliot, one of the pioneers of Minneapolis, presented to the City four acres, between Ninth and Tenth streets, which the Board named Elliot Park in his honor.

During the first two years of the existence of the Board it acquired, by gift and purchase, ten tracts for parks, those most important being Loring Park, 37 acres, and the tract of fifty-five acres inclosing Lake Harriet, a beautiful sheet of water consisting of 360 acres. This latter valuable acquisition was donated by Col. William S. King, Henry B. Beard, and Gen. J. V. D. Reeve. Since that time one hundred and fifty acres have been added to its land area.

In July, 1885, all the shore of the Lake of the Isles, except a few lots which were condemned, was donated to the city. This is now one of our most attractive parks, containing 200 acres. In the same year the east shore of Lake Calhoun was acquired, thus connecting the lake parkways, and now the entire shore is owned by the city, and a boulevard encircles it. 603 This lake and the Lake of the Isles are connected by a short canal, through which pleasure boats pass. A canal is also being made to unite these lakes with Cedar lake. There are now in the park system six lakes, connected by parkways.

During the year 1886, Kenwood Boulevard, containing 20 acres, was graded and improved by the owners and donated to the city. The most important acquisition to the Park System made in 1887 was the tract of 123 acres which includes the Minnehaha Falls. This park is now the most popular in the system, and it is visited by many thousands during the summer months on Sundays and holidays, the visitors frequently numbering over ten thousand.

The next great addition to the parkways was the Minnehaha Parkway, extending from Lake Harriet through the beautiful valley of Minnehaha creek to Minnehaha Park. This parkway, five miles long and from 200 to 600 feet wide, with sections running through the

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natural forest, contains 177 acres, of which over 100 acres was donated by public-spirited citizens.

During the years from 1889 to 1891, inclusive, ten small squares and triangles were donated for small parks, and Col. William S. King presented to the city the beautiful Lyndale Park, containing fifty-one acres, on the east shore of Lake Harriet. The Lakewood Cemetery Association supplemented this last named tract with a gift of thirty-five acres of beautifully wooded land adjoining. Colonel King also deeded a strip of land forty feet wide and a mile in length, for widening the boulevard now called "King's Highway."

Besides the valuable gifts of land which Minneapolis has received, the wisdom of her citizens has been displayed more recently in another form, of which the Shelter House in Camden Park affords the most complete example. This is the generous gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles C. Webber, in memory of their son, John C. Webber, deceased, for whom it is named. It is a beautiful building of reinforced concrete, in the Mission style, and is perfect in its arrangement for the purpose for which it was constructed. There is a large room, 27 by 53 feet, used as a shelter in summer, which is heated during the skating season. It has two large swimming pools, through which a brook of pure water flows continuously, lockers for the clothing 604 of the bathers, modern toilet rooms, and, in the second story, a branch of the Minneapolis Library. The pretty "Shelter" in Loring Park is also a gift to the city.

Columbia Park, containing 185 acres, was purchased in 1892, and its cost was assessed on benefited property, which was greatly enhanced in value by the location of the park.

Glenwood Park, the rural park of the system, now contains nearly 600 acres, which the Board hopes to increase to 1,000 acres. It contains a beautiful little lake, surrounded by hills which are heavily wooded, one of which is the highest point in Hennepin county. In this park the native wild flowers are carefully kept in growing condition by Miss Eloise Butler, who has charge of the wild garden, where nearly all of the native flowers of the

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State are cared for. This collection is much appreciated by those who are interested in plant life, and is of great educational value.

The parkways are important features of the Minneapolis park systems, the most important being the Minnehaha and the River Bank drives.

When Minneapolis and St. Paul purchased the east and west banks of the Mississippi river from Fort Snelling to the University, they secured for posterity the most beautiful parkway in this country, forming really a great park with the mighty river running through it. The area on the west side, from Minnehaha to Riverside Park, and including both, is 369 acres, of the most picturesque character; on the east side, from the University to Fort Snelling, 682 acres.

The late Joseph A. Wheelock, to whom the City of St. Paul and the State of Minnesota owe so much for his unselfish work for their development and prosperity, wrote in one of his reports, when President of the Park Board:

With the acquisition of the river bank from Summit avenue to Fort Snelling, the City of St. Paul will possess a driveway about eight miles and a half in length, along the summit of the bluff walls on the east side of the Mississippi, which eminent landscape architects agree in saying will have no equal in America in the picturesque aspects of the river scenery which it will command, and in the beauty of its forest environment. Meanwhile, the Minneapolis Park Board are about to acquire the corresponding edge and slopes of the bluffs on the western side of the river, which it is hoped the military authorities will extend or permit to be extended to Fort Snelling bridge, which will form one 605 connecting link between the two boulevards, as Marshall avenue bridge will form another. With these connections the twin boulevards will form a circuit along the summits of the bluff hills on both sides of the river, and will duplicate, in one enchanting drive, the charms of each. There will be nothing like it, or approaching it in beauty, in any other American city.

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The development of these river boulevards along the coterminous boundaries of the two cities will bring these parkways and park systems into close contact, being a long step forward towards a still wider scheme of interconnection.

These riverside parkways are now completed, and the dreams of the advocates for the parks are being realized.

Minneapolis now has thirty-three miles of parkways, and this will be largely increased by a drive of over ten miles in length, which will entirely encircle the city, making over forty-three miles within the city limits. Dr. W. W. Folwell, when President of the Board, suggested this drive, which will connect all the parkways and many of the parks of Minneapolis, to be called the "Grand Rounds." This will connect with the St. Paul parkways, giving to the Twin Cities the longest, most diversified, and grandest system of drives in the country. With all of its branches, including those now completed and others which are planned, there will be over seventy-five miles, running through valleys, over hills, bordering lakes and rivers, a large portion through forests and grand natural scenery.

The park system of Minneapolis now consists of:

27 parks of over five acres each 2,767.13 acres.

40 small systems and triangles 228.10 acres.

8 parkways or boulevards from 200 to 600 feet wide 662.58 acres.

12 playgrounds, 9 now in use 31.08 acres.

Total 3,688.89 acres.

If one looks at the large sum the parks have cost and is not familiar with the financial conditions and the amount which should be credited to them through the increase in the value of the real estate contiguous to them, he is apt to say that the City is expending too

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much money for recreation grounds; but the facts are that, with one exception, there is not a park or parkway in Minneapolis that is not a source of profit through the amount collected in taxes on increased valuations. This is 606 not only true in Minneapolis, but it is true in other cities. The great landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, said: "That a well arranged and attractive park adds greatly to the value of real estate, is a well known fact." The foremost business men of New York said the purchase of Central Park was the city's most profitable real estate speculation.

Jacob Riis, the philanthropic friend of the poor, said:

It is a wicked city where the boy is denied a chance to play....Build your parks and playgrounds, and the boy gets a chance at once; and when he gets it, he will go to work and he will be a good citizen. As a result of the three years' era of reform in New York City, in which twenty-two millions of dollars had been expended for parks, playgrounds, and schoolhouses, the death rate was reduced from 26.33 per cent to 18.66 per cent.

An article in the New England Magazine, on the town of Brookline, Mass., says:

Regarding municipal development on broad lines as a remunerative investment for the town, the Beacon Parkway will be cited. Beacon street was widened from 160 to 180 feet in width, the entire cost being \$615,000. In six years the increase in assessed values of land on each side of the Parkway throughout its entire length in Brookline was \$4,330,400, with no allowance for any increase in personal estate incident thereto; thus paying for itself long before its most zealous advocates supposed it would.

The experience of Minneapolis is the same as that of other cities. Before improvements were made in Lake of the Isles Park, lots were selling for from \$15 to \$20 per front foot. Within two years from the beginning of those improvements the price had risen to \$100 and over per front foot. Many more instances could be cited to prove that well considered plans for large public improvements of this kind are profitable investments. But, better than

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the financial benefits to be derived from them, they are invaluable for the promotion of the health, the morals, and the pleasure of the people.

The Park Board for more than twenty years has had the entire control of the planting and care of the street trees, and its forestry committee is planting about two thousand each year. This department has done much to make the streets of 607 the city attractive, and it is becoming noted as one of the most beautiful shaded cities in America.

If the establishment of parks in the towns and cities of the State is encouraged, some speaker, in future years, who has the privilege of appearing before the Minnesota Historical Society, will be able to relate more fully the practical benefits and elevating influences derived from the people's recreation grounds.

Postscript, in accordance with request of the Council .

The foregoing paper, read by its author in the meeting of this Society, met with deservedly generous applause; but, in the discussion which followed, the criticism was made that the author, with characteristic modesty, had carefully avoided any reference to the part he had himself had in the development of the Minneapolis Park System. The undersigned was therefore requested to add a memorandum to accompany this paper, to supply in some measure the admitted deficiency.

The Park System of Minneapolis has not been the work of any one man, but has resulted from the unpaid co-operative efforts of many, so many that space cannot be afforded for even a list. But there is not one of them all who have so co-operated who will not desire to have Mr. Charles M. Loring singled out and honored as the one most active, zealous, and indefatigable. He was a prime mover in all the abortive efforts toward park beginning described in his paper. Failure only spurred him to renewed activity. Possibly he deserves the gratitude of the city for all these failures as much as for the later successes.

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The fundamental act of the legislature of 1883, condemned by the city council and denounced by the Knights of Labor, would not have been passed but for his untiring advocacy. When the first Park Board was formed under the law, Mr. Loring was at once logically placed at its head. He held the presidency for many years, and might have retained it indefinitely, but that he felt obliged to resign when the Board desired to acquire a piece of land in which he had an interest. But no matter whether in the chair or on the floor, and even after his ultimate retirement from the board, his interest never flagged nor his enthusiasm abated. Indeed the contagion of 608 Mr. Loring's enthusiasm has perhaps been the most potent force in the whole development.

Among the services deserving of particular mention is one in which he took great pride, and which was of great and lasting advantage. That was the discovery of two men soon after the organization of the Park Board. It was he who secured the services of Horace W. S. Cleveland, already eminent among American landscape artists, for designing our earlier parks and parkways. Mr. Cleveland possessed in a high degree the art of subordinating art to nature. All his designs were accommodated to the shape and contour of natural surfaces. The grove or forest, the lawn or meadow, in his vistas and surprises were the dominant elements. All artificial constructions were kept out of sight, so far as passible, or blended in the landscape.

The other man was William M. Berry, who had co-operated with Mr. Cleveland in the development of Chicago parks. The two made an admirable team. In absolute sympathy with Mr. Cleveland's ideas, Mr. Berry knew how to work them out faithfully, and with a degree of economy beyond praise. Every dollar allowed him showed in results. It was the effective simplicity of Mr. Cleveland's designs, carried out by Mr. Berry at costs that seem pitifully small in these days, which overcame opposition and reconciled citizens to larger outlays for park acquirement and maintenance.

In the working season there were few days, for many years, when Mr. Loring was not in the field with one or other of these admirable experts. In grateful recognition of his labors

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the Park Board gave the name of Loring Park to the first acquired and most conspicuous of the interior parks. It would be but just that some enduring memorials of Cleveland and Berry, his co-workers, should be provided.

For more than half a century Charles M. Loring has had the park system of Minneapolis close to his heart, but not to the exclusion of other good causes. Every public interest of his city and state has had his sympathy and support; but his fellow citizens know him best by his long and faithful labors to build up their parks, and they have given him the title they desire posterity to perpetuate, "Father of the Park System."

William W. Folwell .